

# **THE POOR, THE BIBLE, AND FOOD STAMPS**

## **THE TRUE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS AND THE POOR— and a few words about food stamps (for poor) vs. home mortgage interest deduction (for middle to upper class).**

The true spirit of Christmas is acquired and/or enhanced by reflecting on God's values and priorities reflected in the Christmas narratives of the Bible. Consider the poor.

## **GOD'S IDENTIFICATION WITH THE POOR.**

Jesus was not born in the Roman empire (political center of power), nor in Jerusalem's Temple (religious center of power for the Jews). He was born in Bethlehem to a poor family. At birth, He was placed in an animal feeding trough. He was worshipped by the poor shepherds. He and His family became refugees, having to leave their home to live in Egypt until Herod died.

## **JESUS AND THE POOR.**

God's concern and identification with the poor did not end with the birth and childhood of Jesus. Jesus' first sermon was explicitly addressed to the poor and oppressed (Luke 4:17-18). When John the Baptist was doubting Jesus's identity, Jesus responded by sending news that the Messiah could be identified by the one who was preaching to the poor (Matt. 11:5). As far as the poor in our periphery, Jesus promised that those who help the poor would be "touching" Him (Matt. 25:35-45).

## **EVANGELICAL CONSERVATIVES AND THE POOR.**

In spite of how much the Word of God reveals God's concern for the poor, on both an individual level and government level, I have encountered among some of my fellow conservative doctrinal believers a disdain for the poor, who they scapegoat for budget deficits. It is rather odd, in light of what the Word of God says about the poor, that many conservative Christians view the poor without compassion and view any government help (safety-

net) for them as a great evil.

I am a conservative evangelical. I have earned four college degrees from different evangelical universities and seminaries, yet I have never had one course on biblical socio-political-economics and the poor. The closest I came to any study of the poor and government is my introduction to ethics and natural law, which was primarily from a Thomistic/Catholic viewpoint. Given that the Bible refers to the poor and justice about 2,000 times, it is rather odd that these truths are not taught in many evangelical schools or seminaries—or churches.

No wonder much of conservative Christianity has been hijacked and co-opted by secular socio-political-economic organizations. If one does not possess a robust biblical socio-political-economic view that is anchored and shaped by Scripture, one will absorb secular politics on the Right or Left. In such a vacuum, Christians are often sitting ducks for political spin-masters.

I will never forget when a fellow doctrinal believer slammed me when I

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mentioned God's concern for the poor and how some of the poor need help from the government with food stamps (government safety-net is in the Bible). He reminded me, in a very angry tone, of the deficit and that we simply did not have the money to help them.

## **FOOD STAMPS VS. MORTGAGE INTEREST DEDUCTION.**

It is worth noting that we do seem to have money for those in the middle to upper class. Consider the fact that even at the depth of the Recession, with enrollment at a record high, food stamps cost about \$78 billion a year, compared with \$100 billion for mortgage interest credit. That's right, we spend more money helping middle- and upper-income Americans buy homes (and vacation homes) than we spend providing food for poor people. You can bet that if the government wanted to do away with home mortgage interest deduction, there would be a hue and cry with no concern about the deficit. Why the double standard, which is routinely condemned throughout the Old Testament?

Furthermore, a large chunk of the food-stamp budget goes to support working households. About 40% of the "takers" on the food-stamp programs are families working hard to make ends meet. And how high are these "moochers" living? In Texas, for example, the average monthly benefit is \$125 a month. Have fun feeding your family on that. By the way, most food-stamp recipients are white, and a large minority is "working poor."

## **CHRISTMAS AND THE POOR.**

Anyway, the Christmas season is a wonderful time to reach out and help the poor instead of being obsessed with commercialism, drinking, eating, all the while ignoring, vilifying, and scapegoating the poor. It is a wonderful time to reflect on our infinite God wrapping Himself in flesh and blood and living in poverty to save, feed, and care for the poor.

Christmas is a wonderful time to consider how God divested Himself for the good of the poor as well as everyone else. He became poor so that others could become rich. We likewise are called to divest ourselves of our time and

conveniences to reach out to the needy. We are to be living examples of Jesus (rather than echo chambers of secular political parties).

## **BIBLE AND THE POOR.**

Here are just a few examples of God's attitude and directives regarding the poor.

### **Leviticus 19:10**

`And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the LORD your God.

**Luke 4:18** "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to *the* poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to *the* captives And recovery of sight to *the* blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed;

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### **Matthew 25:35**

`for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 `I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' 37 "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, `Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 38 `When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 39 `Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40 "And the King will answer and say to them, `Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' 41 "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, `Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 `for I

was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; 43 `I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' 44 "Then they also will answer Him, saying, `Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' 45 "Then He will answer them, saying, `Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.'

**James 1:27** Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

**James 2:15** If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?